

Unions complicit in GM attack on European auto workers

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The announcement by General Motors that it plans further cuts in wages and conditions at its European facilities, together with the closure of two of its factories in Europe, represents a new stage in the attack on European auto workers and the working class as a whole.

The GM management in Detroit is determined to impose on European workers the brutal forms of exploitation it has already established at its American plants. In close cooperation with the Obama administration, GM has used the economic crisis to lay off 31,000 workers in the US. New workers have been hired at half the wages of older workers, and working conditions have been worsened. On this basis, GM last year announced record profits.

Now GM has its sights set on Europe. Just as it worked closely with the United Auto Workers union to impose speedup and wage cuts on its US work force, so too in Europe GM is working with the unions and their officials in the factories. A key role is being played by UAW President Bob King, who several weeks ago joined the board of Opel AG, GM's German subsidiary.

King embodies the transformation of the UAW into a business enterprise that has nothing in common with the interests of auto workers. He exemplifies the role of the unions today as corporatist syndicates that work to maximise the companies' profits and suppress any resistance by the workers.

The son of a personnel executive at Ford, King never misses an opportunity to expound his corporatist views. In October of last year, just after he signed a new four-year contract with disastrous consequences for

American auto workers, he said on US television: "Our view has changed. We understand that the people who have the most at stake in the long-term success of these companies is our membership."

The auto industry, King continued, was the best example of "business, labor and the government all working together." He elaborated: "Rather than polarizing and taking polarizing positions, we came to the table collectively."

King is working closely with the German IG Metall union. His kindred spirit is the new chairman of Opel's joint works council, Dr. Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug. An academic, Schäfer-Klug was hired 12 years ago by the former joint works council chairman, Klaus Franz, as adviser to the works council.

He was later promoted to the post of coordinator of the European Works Council at GM. His task was the development of trade union networks at GM plants in Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe. He has played a crucial role in playing off one plant against another and preventing any joint struggle by GM workers.

In January of this year, he became chairman of the works council in Rüsselsheim and deputy chairman of the Opel Supervisory Board. At the same time, he was appointed head of the European Works Council and chairman of the company's joint works council.

At the Opel board meeting last Wednesday, all of the union representatives present expressed their readiness to collaborate with management. Schäfer-Klug presented his own restructuring plan, drawn up by the joint works council.

While GM continues to threaten to close the German

Opel plant in Bochum with its 3,100 employees and the British Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port with 2,100 workers, union representatives stressed they were prepared to accept further far-reaching concessions in the name of preventing plant closures—the same formula used by the UAW to push through both cuts and closures.

The defence of all jobs in all plants, together with the defence of wages and benefits, is possible only by breaking the grip of the trade union bureaucracy and their representatives in the factories. This, however, requires a political struggle against the unions' nationalist program.

The ability of the auto companies to play off the workers of one country against the workers of another country, using the concessions obtained in the US as a new baseline for attacks on workers in Europe, shows the bankruptcy of the unions' nationalist perspective in an era of globalized production. Nationalism goes hand in hand with class collaboration.

On the reactionary foundations of nationalism and class collaboration, the unions in the US and Europe work deliberately and systematically to block any common struggle of auto workers against the transnational corporations. They consciously set out to help lower the wages and benefits of their own members so as to entice the corporations to keep production in their countries, thereby protecting their income flow from dues and their privileged position as junior partners of the companies.

When GM-Opel managers and their underlings in IG Metall and the UAW maintain that it is not possible to preserve jobs and wages under the given conditions, they are acknowledging that the capitalist profit system stands in irreconcilable conflict with the interests and needs of the working population. The defence of jobs and past social gains must be based on a political perspective that places the needs of the population above the profit interests of big business, i.e., a socialist perspective.

At the heart of this perspective is the closest unity between European workers and their brothers and sisters in the US and worldwide. Every worker in every country has the right to a well-paid job and social benefits. Employment and a living wage for all is a

basic right. It can be enforced only in a struggle against the capitalist profit system and its super-rich elite, which is systematically driving the working population into poverty and misery.

In order to break the control of the unions and works councils it is necessary to establish rank-and-file action committees to organise joint international action, strikes and the occupation of plants threatened with closure.

In line with this struggle, the Socialist Equality Party of Germany fully supports the election campaign of the SEP in the US and its presidential and vice presidential candidates Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer, who have placed at the centre of their efforts the fight for the international unity of the working class.

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